

# Enrollment Management, Inc.: External Influences on Our Practice

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USC Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice

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## **USC Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice**

The USC Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice was founded in 2007 and is dedicated to research and action that advances the societal benefit of enrollment policies and practices in higher education. In 2010, the center became part of the USC Rossier School of Education, one of the world's premier schools committed to strengthening society through excellence in education.

Are the educational values and goals of admission and enrollment officers undermined by their processes and practices? This important question was posed by Andrew Delbanco of Columbia University during an address at the College Board Colloquium in January 2002. At the heart of his concern was the sense that institutional pursuits of status and prestige in the face of market competition are leading enrollment professionals to neglect their moral commitments to students. Delbanco argued that these market forces are often at odds with collective efforts to promote student access and opportunity through such mechanisms as early decision programs to boost application rates and preferential aid packaging that tend to disproportionately benefit wealthier students. Delbanco challenged his audience to take a more insightful look at their practices and weigh the costs and benefits of the admissions and financial aid system.

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Years later, Delbanco’s concerns about the trajectory of the enrollment sector appear to have gone unheeded. It is apparent many enrollment practices have become more market-driven, oftentimes aiming to secure students who not only fill seats but fulfill myriad institutional goals, predominantly those with prestige and revenue implications. That said, the reasons behind this market orientation have been less clear.

A brief look at the history of enrollment management reminds us that colleges and universities have not always been comprised of enrollment units with complex and sometimes competing interests. Until the late nineteenth century, admissions, student aid and other enrollment-related

functions were largely under the purview of faculty and senior institutional leaders at the relatively small number of institutions in the United States (Coomes, 2000). However, with the establishment of land-grant institutions as a function of the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890, and increased emphasis on education at federal and state levels, Americans increasingly saw a college education as a worthy and attainable goal (Thelin, 2003). Colleges and universities found themselves in need of more formalized administrative structures to manage rising enrollments. As such, the registrar role was developed and to a large extent broadly coordinated all non-academic related tasks, including student recruitment, financial aid, recordkeeping, and student service areas (Conner 1979). As the twentieth century unfolded, the registrar’s role was gradually unbundled, giving way to more specialized roles within the greater enrollment function. Private institutions began utilizing admission directors to recruit prospective

<sup>1</sup>Though Andrew Delbanco specifically referred to admission and student aid professionals in his address, consistent with our larger research agenda, we prefer to include admission and student aid professionals within a broader category, “enrollment professionals,” that includes any institutional member that has a specific and dedicated role in the overall process of recruiting, enrolling, retaining and graduating students

students at the turn of the century (Henderson, 2008) and admission officers, financial aid directors, student services officers and the like became increasingly common so as to manage an influx of students and their many needs following World War II and to strategically coordinate efforts to fill seats during leaner years once the “tidal wave” had subsided in the mid-twentieth century (Hossler & Anderson, 2004; Huddleston, 2000; Coomes, 2000; Duffy & Goldberg, 1998).

Concurrently, various professional organizations emerged for these groups of enrollment professionals, including the American Association of Collegiate Registrars in 1910 (later becoming the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers), the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) in 1937, the National Association for Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) in 1951, the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA) in 1966, and the Association for Institutional Research (AIR) in 1966. Though they may have had slightly different missions, these governing associations and the professionals they represent generally made commitments to serving students and helping to ensure that all students have opportunities to fulfill their educational potential, lead productive lives, and make valuable contributions as engaged members of society.

In 1972, the federal government passed legislation that essentially gave birth to the enrollment management profession, providing the stimulus necessary to bring together the aforementioned groups of educational professionals under a common umbrella. During the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, aid that had previously been given directly to institutions for distribution to students was shifted directly to students in an effort to give students more buying power and infuse the higher education system with market-like competition predicated on capitalist ideals (Slaughter & Leslie, 2001). Colleges and universities now had to compete for students and their aid dollars.

Sensing a need for institutions to tactically bring together various personnel with direct responsibility for the recruitment, enrollment, retention, and graduation of students, the “enrollment management” concept was coined by Jack Maguire and Frank Campanella at Boston College shortly thereafter in 1974 (Henderson, 2008).

A comprehensive enrollment unit may include institutional research and planning, marketing, admissions, registrar, financial aid, student orientation, retention, and advising units (Huddleston, 2000). Though enrollment management partially evolved out of the recognition that institutions needed more strategic, coordinated approaches to meeting multi-faceted challenges that impacted institutional enrollments and destabilized resources,



especially in the wake of increasing competition for students, the heart of the enrollment management concept was also founded upon an educational mission. By more effectively planning, implementing, and evaluating functions critical to moving students through the enrollment pipeline from the point of initial contact to graduation, institutions can use enrollment management practices to enhance the efficacy by which they meet their educational commitments to students (Penn, 1999). For example, institutions can enroll more demographically diverse classes of students so as to provide students with the educational benefits of a more diverse environment, maximize course availability, and consistently monitor and meet student financial needs, thereby increasing the chances of student success. Simultaneously, careful preparation, research, and

coordination of units allow institutions to enroll a mix of students that meet institutional revenue, diversity, academic, and social goals. In effect, enrollment management is a more holistic, interdependent campus-wide approach to managing enrollments that took shape as institutions sought to more comprehensively improve student educational experiences and outcomes while concurrently meeting various institutional needs and institutional goals.

At some point, however, the practice of enrollment management arguably morphed from a strategic effort grounded in educational ideals into one obsessed with serving institutional interests. Competition for students and their aid dollars gradually led to a plethora of market-driven practices, many of which are not in the best interests of students. Assessing an institution's institutional quality is arguably difficult. Rather than compete for students based on educational quality or the extent to which institutions were effectively meeting their stated missions, usually oriented toward public service and equitable opportunity, colleges and universities competed by developing a variety of strategies with prestige and revenue concerns at the forefront. More specifically, colleges and universities competed with one another by becoming more selective (Breland, Maxey, Gernand, Cumming, & Trapani, 2002), by segmenting recruitment markets based on student demographic variables that include socioeconomic status (Black, 2009; Schulz, 2008), by increasingly utilizing merit-based aid programs to entice students (Heller, 2006; McPherson & Schapiro, 1998) despite adverse impacts upon low-income and minority students (Griffith, 2009), by developing

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early decision admissions programs to increase yield rates and enhance institutional profiles (Fallows, 2001) despite their propensity to advantage more affluent students (Toor, 2001), and by marketing consumables such as student recreation facilities to capitalize on the consumer mentality of potential students (Schulz, 2008). A market discourse took hold that fundamentally reoriented the way institutions viewed students. Consistent with the tenets of academic capitalism, students became consumers seeking an educational product, and enrollment managers sought to ensure they offered the best product as a function of institutional exclusivity and the types of students enrolled (Slaughter and Leslie, 2001). Nearly forty years after the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act directed aid from institutions to students in an effort to enhance student choice and opportunity, the system of higher

education continues to be widely stratified with regard to college degree attainment across family income levels (Mortensen, 2000) and with regard to the distribution of students within America's educational hierarchy (Astin & Osegueda, 2004). A market-driven enrollment industry has emerged with priorities that are eroding the educational foundation of the academy and hindering our capacity to meet President Obama's goal of having the United States reclaim its position as the world leader in educational attainment by the year 2020.

This has to change.

Before changes can be made, however, one must first understand why enrollment management has transformed into a market-driven enterprise. Next, one must better understand the profession and, specific to this analysis, external influences on its practice. In particular, it is critical to assess:

- Where do enrollment professionals derive their strategies and for what purpose in general?
- What types of strategies have enrollment professionals utilized from these sources?
- What is their motivation for turning to these strategy sources?
- How did enrollment professionals establish relationships with these entities?
- What are the anticipated long-term impacts of these trends?

In an effort to address these and other issues related to enrollment professionals, we conducted over 50 semi-structured interviews of one hour each with chief admission officers and chief enrollment officers during early 2009. These enrollment professionals primarily served at four-year institutions that are diverse with respect to public-private designation, Carnegie classification, and geographic location. Perspectives from enrollment professionals at 50 unique institutions are represented in this analysis.

### Strategy Sources and Recommendations

When asked where enrollment professionals seek to inform and borrow strategy ideas to guide their practice, chief admission and chief enrollment officers primarily highlighted two distinct areas: business resources and professional consultants, with substantially heavier reliance on consultants for direction. For the sake of this analysis, we will focus almost exclusively on consultants as strategy sources, though we would briefly like to note the considerable reliance on business resources as well.

Approximately one-third of participants reported utilizing business resources. Enrollment professionals identified business periodicals such as the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, *Fast Company*, *Harvard Business Review*, *The Economist* and *Forbes* as useful for their practice, along with printed and online resources that outline general technology and communication trends, management, and customer service developments. Marketing periodicals such as *Advertising Age*, *MarketingSherpa*, and *The Marketing News*, provided by the American Marketing Association, were additional sources specified from which enrollment professionals extract strategy ideas. A handful of enrollment professionals made a point of stating that they hold business resources in high regard, viewing the corporate sector as ahead of the curve as compared to resources from professional associations and other non-corporate sources. Others praised the corporate sector for what they believed to be its proven efficiency and effectiveness, which encourages enrollment professionals to place their trust in corporate strategies and support efforts to transplant them into the higher education sector. In essence, evidence suggests that ideas and strategies commonly exchanged within the business sphere influence enrollment policy and practice as enrollment professionals draw upon business resources to inform their

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<sup>2</sup> For the sake of this analysis, the term consultant will be used to collectively refer to all educational vendors and consultants that sell a product or service. They may be for-profit or non-profit entities.



work within colleges and universities. Considering the fact that such resources are designed to help enhance the bottom line for businesses, concerns about the extent to which they may encourage or facilitate a move to the market in pursuit of prestige and revenue, to the detriment of an institution's educational function, are legitimate.

Though business resources may be an important external influence on the practice of enrollment management, they pale in comparison to the relative influence of consultants. Of the 50 unique institutions represented in our study, enrollment professionals at all but three mentioned having either hired or sought ideas from consultants,

with most institutions having current or recent contracts with one or more external consultants. To best communicate the widespread use of consultants, it would seem appropriate to provide the substantial list of consultants that were specifically identified by the relatively small number of enrollment professionals with whom we spoke.

Consultant strategy sources included the following entities, in no particular order:

TargetX	Hobson's	College Marketing Technologies	Steve Brooks
Noel-Levitz	George Dane Associates	Eduventures	James Towers
Royall & Company	EMAS Pro	Datatel	Calidis
Lawler Group	Fire Engine RED	ACT, Inc.	AACRAO Consulting
North Charles Street Design	Allied Marketing	Richard Harrison Bailey/The Agency	NRCCUA
Pro Ed	TALISMA	Peterson's	
Ruffalo Cody	Human Capital	Princeton Review	
Stamats	Hyland OnBase	College Board Student Search Service	
Scannell & Kurz	Carnegie Communications	Hardwick Day	
Kelsh Wilson Design	The Creativist	Maguire Associates	

Though some are more specific than others and some overlap may be evident, areas of focus for which ideas were harvested or services rendered included the following, again in no particular order:

Purchasing names to generate prospects	Enrollment processes and procedures	E-mail campaigning	Website	Visibility
Mailings	Marketing strategies	Social networking	Publishing	Campus visit experience
Financial aid modeling	Viewbook	Calendar scheduling system	Data capturing and cleaning in database management system	Constituent Relationship Management (CRM)
Branding	Telecounseling program	Communication with families	Geodemographic work	Financial aid discounting matrix policy
Aid strategies	Messaging	File analysis process	Online community	Academic competitiveness of high schools
Software oversight	Scholarship funding	Efforts to convert inquiries to applicants	Enrollment strategies	Reorganizations to student financial service sector
Electronic/online applications	Communication efforts	Promotion	Telemarketing	Admissions records/imaging
Aid packaging and leveraging	Data analysis	Predictive modeling	Direct mail and direct marketing	Online advising
Search programs	Student tracking tool	Student Information Systems	Strategic marketing initiative	Enrollment revenue management system/net revenue projections
Access to/Monitor other institutional strategies/approaches	Fundraising model for enrollment and territory mgmt	Retention outreach	Financial aid research	Survey research on students and parents

While a few of the services identified represent non-profit entities, these lists are quite extensive and reflect a booming higher education industry. Private-equity firms invested \$161 million dollars into private companies that run for-profit institutions and educational firms in 2005 (Blumenstyk, 2005). Not only has the level of those investments since increased, but more colleges than ever are hiring outside companies to help them find and enroll students (Blumenstyk, 2007).

To be clear, there is nothing inherently troubling about institutions seeking assistance from external sources to help them recruit, enroll, and meet student needs. In fact, some of the consultants identified have a history of service to underserved populations and to state and national educational goals. What is troubling is the market orientation of many of the strategies enrollment professionals are borrowing from the private sector and infusing within colleges and universities. Upon closer examination of our data, strategies implemented by enrollment professionals based on consultant recommendations largely center on institutional marketing and branding, student search, and the strategic use of financial aid rather than on improving the educational practices of institutions to attract and secure students.



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Regardless of whether consultants are actually pushing enrollment professionals to adopt market-driven practices or consultants are simply responding to the desires of their clients, consultants appear to be responsible for perpetuating an enrollment system governed by competition and revenue concerns. Enrollment professionals we spoke with described having implemented strategies from consultants that encourage substantial investments in communication and marketing areas for the purpose of student persuasion. More than half of the enrollment professionals in our study looked to external consultants to enhance their marketing efforts, embracing everything from variable piece marketing to mass notification strategies, customized websites, high-end publications,

and the integration of e-mail, blogging, and social network applications to influence student behavior. Moreover, one-third of enrollment professionals within our study reportedly turned to consultants for assistance with student search processes, sometimes highlighting how consultant strategies allowed enrollment professionals to target and segment recruitment efforts into “proven” markets. Rather than expand opportunity, search efforts became more focused as consultants helped enrollment professionals shift “from fishing with a net to fishing with a spear,” by specifying “which students [the institution] need to be in conversation with.” Finally, strategies from consultants have facilitated efforts to use financial aid as a weapon for competitive advantage rather than primarily as a tool for assisting students. This last piece in particular especially deserves scrutiny.

America's financial aid system is historically built on the notion it is socially responsible to use merit-aid to encourage promising students to maximize educational opportunities and to use need-based aid to ensure that the talents of the less advantaged are cultivated for the greater social good (McPherson & Schapiro, 1998). That said, our conversations with enrollment professionals suggest they are being led to redefine the purpose of student aid as one predicated on institutional need. More than one-third of the institutions represented in our sample have reportedly turned to external consultants for assistance with financial aid modeling, leveraging, packaging, research and/or analysis. Enrollment professionals from a handful of these institutions provided specific examples of how consultants have influenced their practice. In addition to embracing the use of econometric modeling as a means for strategically estimating the effect of student aid on yield behavior, enrollment professionals described having shaped their aid packaging in response to the recommendation of consultants. More specifically, we were



presented with examples whereby enrollment professionals gave less money to more students in an effort to more efficiently utilize limited aid resources en route to securing enrollments. In one account, full tuition awards were broken into smaller grants for students after consultants suggested those same students would still enroll, a strategy that may result in more students with unmet need. Yet another enrollment professional was persuaded to front load financial aid awards to increase the admissions yield for new freshmen students, a practice used to entice students to enroll but one that also leaves them to scramble for funding in subsequent years. At its core, these practices reveal how external influences may be fostering a fundamental rethinking as to the purpose of

financial aid and the overall function of enrollment management. Lines are being blurred between a corporate sector, whose values are founded upon notions of competition and revenue maximization, and an educational sector traditionally motivated by social considerations.

### **Why Enrollment Professionals Utilize Consultants**

If strategies from consultants are problematic or questionable, why do enrollment professionals turn to consultants as strategy sources? We must consider their motivations as well as how enrollment professionals come into contact with consultants, which harbor both proactive and reactive elements. This section will first more closely analyze their impetus to reach out to consultants. Interestingly, enrollment professionals not only cited reasons behind mining commercial groups for strategies but highlighted ways external consultants are employed as strategies as well. The following analysis will more specifically speak to these themes, identifying how the need for expertise, political expediency, a capacity for monitoring competitors, and professional histories with consultants lead enrollment professionals to engage the commercial higher education sector.

#### ***Expertise***

One of the most prominent themes to emerge from our analysis is that of the desire for expertise in enrollment management. Enrollment professionals from nearly half of the institutions represented in our study highlighted the need for content experts and proven strategies, especially in the face of tight institutional budgets and personnel resources that are constrained when it comes to their size, availability, and know-how.

*I think you just have to be realistic with how you spend your budget dollars, and I just think there's certain projects that it makes more sense to go to an expert right away and say, "Hey, you do this and we will -" instead of us spinning our wheels and not producing a quality product.*

*Well, with Noel-Levitz, in terms of the [financial aid] leveraging, and we just don't have the statistical know-how to do things they can do. We don't have anybody on staff that has the time or the expertise to crunch the numbers like they do....] We're very committed to a leveraging approach, and they just have the expertise...With TargetX, we initially got in with them on their email piece. They can just do things that we don't have the technical capability to do.*

*I think just knowing that they've got expertise and the time to work on projects and give us the knowledge that we really don't have the time to do. We hire the calling folks because they can reach 15,000 to 20,000 students in three weeks, and there's no way we could pull that off. In terms of the financial aid leveraging and some of the market development, they've got the data, they've got the analyses that it would take us forever to come up with. So I do think that we're paying for the brain power behind these different things.*

*Most enrollment offices, we don't have the technology to be doing this in-house, and it's so incredibly fine-tuned. Actually, although we've spent more money, it has saved us over \$250,000 already in mailing costs, publications, eliminating large portions of mailings, eliminating lines of work, not having to rehire someone.*

*We don't have the staff to do the email blasts, to do the text messaging. Everything like this sounds pretty simple, but it takes us a lot longer to do it than it does an outside source.*

*It's cheap. It doesn't take any human resources either. And there's a lot more flexibility, I feel, when working with third-party vendors on stuff that they're experts at rather than try and recreate it here within a strained kind of IT department. It's always busy and stuff like that.*

External consultants are viewed as authorities on enrollment matters, in part due to the scale of their operations that often allows them to test and refine ideas among their many constituents.

*Well, our search program and application generation program, which we work with them on I think probably gets changed every year. Because they work with about 150 schools, we're able to get some really nice, direct examples of things that are kind of tried and tested and true in terms of at other places and we're able to change them here. So every year that we do our search or we do our application generation program we're changing things up a little bit.*

Some enrollment professionals we spoke with placed so much trust in the expertise of consultants that they reportedly turn to them for advice and to affirm their approach to various issues regardless of whether a contract for services is in place. Their ideas are held in such high-esteem that enrollment professionals make every effort to replicate them.

*But they are people that, even if I wasn't doing business with them, I would call on for advice, for this, that or the other thing.*

*I went to them to help make sure I was doing it the right way.*

*...sometimes you do get ideas from vendors that, even if you don't ultimately use the vendor, you're able to implement some of it in-house.*

In essence, consultants are viewed as “innovative” and capable of taking institutions to “that next level” with their expertise that is not only viewed as desirable but crucial within a competitive market. The expertise of consultants is made all the more salient by enrollment professionals trying to do more with fewer resources and an expertise deficiency within institutions. This last piece, in particular, may speak to serious issues within the development pipeline for enrollment professionals; more specifically, revealing what may be inadequate preparation programs and a shortage of enrollment professionals available to meet the needs of institutions.

### ***Political Expediency***

In addition to bringing in consultants to comprehensively assess enrollment policies and practices and to inform or carry out strategic initiatives, approximately one-fifth of the enrollment professionals within our study stressed the

importance of hiring external consultants for reasons of political expediency. More simply put, it is easier to influence and reassure institutional authorities, including presidents, provosts, faculty and board members, that one's enrollment policies and practices are sound by inviting the seemingly objective perspectives of external consultants than it is to preach from one's own pulpit. As such, internal institutional politics may motivate

enrollment professionals to embrace consultants as strategy sources.

*Sometimes you want to convince your president or your provost to do something, but coming from you it doesn't carry the same weight as if it comes from someone else outside the university who has done the research and reports the result. And that's where we are. There is something I want to get done, and I'm going to ask someone to do the work and then report to the president.*

*But I think the big piece with the consultants is hopefully removing some of the political pressures that come along with recommendations for change.*

That said, in some circumstances internal institutional politics may also encourage enrollment professionals to utilize external consultants as a strategy in and of itself. Enrollment professionals we spoke with described needing to bring in consultants to push through their agendas. Rather than reach out to commercial entities to conduct research and chart a course for change, a handful

of enrollment professionals detailed the practice of using consultants to state what is already known for reasons of political convenience.

*Well, of course, the external view of things always has value. Sometimes you have external people tell you what you already know so that you can say that people outside see this, because you can't be a prophet in your own country.*

*...I think you can't be an expert in your own backyard. And if somebody comes in from 100 miles away and they say the same thing you've been saying, sometimes people listen better.*

*And so sometimes you bring the consultants in to satisfy the board, to satisfy somebody outside, to verify that what you're doing is, in fact, a good thing.*

In summary, there is evidence that suggests enrollment professionals may channel limited funds to external consultants in an effort to avoid political barriers within their institutions. Aside from the consequences of inviting

consultants to introduce strategies disproportionately shaped by notions of competition and revenue maximization, this practice may also be inefficiently channeling limited resources to commercial agencies with few tangible gains for institutions and the students they serve.

### ***A Capacity for Monitoring Competitors***

A handful of enrollment professionals we spoke with mentioned the need or desire to monitor their competitors as a reason they felt connecting with external consultants is important. The following two quotes serve to illustrate this perspective:

*And think that's – sometimes utilizing our outside consultants to get a feel for what some of the other schools are doing sometimes, is helpful too. They'll talk about, "You know, well, [institution] is moving towards [program] and they're going to be implementing there a new first-year student program to help students pick majors. And so this product was going to be -." And I'm like, "Oh really?" You hear little tidbits and then you have to research it a little bit more. I think sometimes they spill the beans without realizing that they are, and it helps you identify what somebody else is going to be doing or what they're working on.*

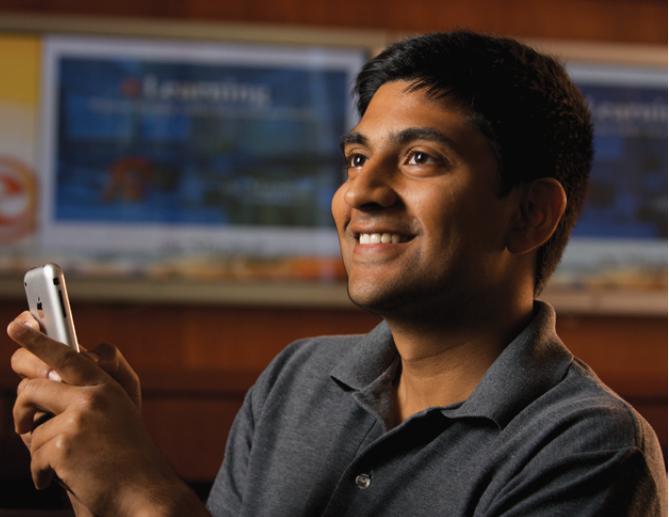
*The second thing – and this is probably the more compelling thing, at least professionally, and which will be no surprise to you – is that I know [my institution]. I know [my institution] better than any admissions person in the country, but I don't know squat about a whole bunch of other schools and [consultants] do. They know a lot – they know a little about a lot of schools. And I don't know anything about [an example institution], but if they've done consulting there, and they're consulting here, then I'm going to know something about [that example institution] before the [consultant] leaves.*

Although only a small number referenced the monitoring of their competitors as reason for connecting with external consultants, the significance of this theme is worthy of inclusion for several reasons. First, it speaks to the competitive landscape that is redefining the purpose of enrollment management in higher education as one predicated on trumping other institutions rather than focusing on drawing upon existing research and best practices recommendations to collectively meet student and societal needs. Secondly, it reveals the capacity for external consultants to profit from playing institutions against one another. Enrollment professionals appear to recognize the powerful information these commercial agencies possess as strategy databases. It is critical that these agencies behave ethically and responsibly, avoiding any temptation to exacerbate an arms race between institutions regardless of the financial benefits of doing so. Finally, the willingness of enrollment professionals to reach out to consultants for competitive intelligence amplifies the capacity of external consultants to serve as conduits for the spread of market-driven strategies primarily focused on prestige and revenue maximization. If enrollment professionals from multiple institutions turn to external consultants as strategy sources and to learn the strategic approaches of competitors, this may inevitably lead institutions to become more alike in their policies and practices; for better or worse.

### ***Professional Histories***

The final theme within this category that surfaced in our analysis centers on relationships between enrollment professionals and external consultants. While only a select number of the enrollment professionals we spoke with for this study identified their professional history with specific consultants as reasons for reaching out to this sector, this trend is worthy of closer analysis.

Evidence from our study indicates enrollment professionals may become acquainted with and partial to certain consultants during various points in their careers and feel compelled to continue to contract with those consul-



tants over the long-term. There appears to be support for the notion that familiarity breeds comfort. Moreover, a pair of practitioners also noted the relationships they have formed with colleagues who eventually left their enrollment positions within institutions to take up residency in the consulting sector. Relationships with these colleagues have ultimately resulted in business arrangements between the institutions and the consulting agencies represented. As such, personal connections served to open an outlet between the education and commercial sectors. In addition, enrollment profes-

sionals in our study identified their mentors as having encouraged them to form relationships with certain consultants. Such mentors trained enrollment professionals in their ways, which at times included reliance upon various external entities for certain tasks. Many of these relationships with consultants have since persisted. Finally, data from our study point to a permeable boundary between enrollment professionals and the commercial sector as having led enrollment professionals to turn to external consultants as strategy sources. A few of the enrollment professionals we spoke with had established formal ties between themselves and external consultants, having both paid and unpaid board appointments and advisory positions that have brought these practitioners into close contact with consultants. Not surprisingly considering their pronounced relationships with these entities, at least one of the enrollment professionals in these positions acknowledged utilizing products or implementing services at their institutions from the agencies for which they serve. Essentially, the distinction between enrollment professionals and external consultants has become increasingly blurry. This has allowed enrollment professionals to more closely connect with commercial agencies and contributed to the widespread dissemination and infusion of market values into the enrollment sector.

## **Establishing Relationships through Proactive and Reactive Means**

As noted at the outset of the previous section, enrollment professionals come into contact with external consultants through a number of proactive and reactive ways. As would be expected, consultants reach out to enrollment professionals to generate business. Perhaps less expectedly, enrollment professionals appear to initiate many relationships with external consultants and are normalizing the use of consultants and their market approach to enrollment management in and among themselves.

### ***Consultant Outreach***

There should be little surprise when we convey that many enrollment professionals establish relationships with consultants in response to outreach efforts on behalf of the many firms, agencies, and organizations in this sector. Consultants put out a steady supply of e-mails and marketing publications to generate interest in their products and services. They also regularly cold call potential customers. About one-fifth of the 50 institutions represented in our study reported establishing a relationship with an external consultant in response to direct outreach efforts by a consultant.

### ***Enrollment Professionals Initiating Relationships with Consultants***

Although many relationships with external consultants are formed following an initial effort on the part of the consultants, we were surprised to discover a substantial number of relationships having been established due to active pursuits by enrollment professionals on behalf of their institutions. About one-half of the institutions represented in our study have reportedly initiated a relationship with a consultant. This is primarily done by visiting vendor exhibits at conferences hosted by professional associations such as NACAC and AACRAO, and by attending conferences, seminars, and/or webinars hosted by national consulting firms that include Noel-Levitz, TargetX, and Human Capital. This finding speaks to the degree to which enrollment professionals are hungry for additional training and knowledge that allows them to effectively serve in their roles. In addition, a handful of enrollment professionals reported soliciting consultants to help solve specific enrollment issues. Considering a perceived lack of available content experts on campus and constrained institutional resources, this finding is not unexpected.

### ***Normalization within the Profession***

By far the most common method enrollment professionals in our study came into contact with external consultants was in response to recommendations from colleagues. Nearly every enrollment professional we spoke with actively



participates in regional and state consortia, regional and national professional associations and their activities, and/or is involved with networks of institutions that share similar missions or religious affiliations. Many of these enrollment professionals also belong to informal groups of enrollment professionals that regularly discuss common challenges and dole out advice and guidance related to their enrollment concerns. In short, there are numerous opportunities for enrollment professionals to spread ideas among one another and, despite the perception that today's higher education landscape is hypercompetitive and therefore tight-lipped, we found that enrollment professionals frequently mine and share ideas with one another through these various channels. This propensity and capacity for sharing ideas appears to be normalizing the use of consultants. More than one-fifth of the enrollment professionals in our study specifically identified colleague recommendations as having led them to utilize external consultants.

The following quote illustrates this perspective:

*...I think you get the real story from [colleagues], the good and the bad, and so before I jump into things I usually reach out and talk with folks who are in similar positions at other institutions that I've come to know over the years and seek their advice. Even in picking vendors that you might talk with, I think you get some solid advice from your colleagues.*

As such, professional associations, consortia, support groups and the like appear to be serving as conduits for the spread of industry practices that, as we have shown, disproportionately focus on competitive strategies and revenue maximization. This process is consistent with the tenets of institutional theory, which highlight the

capacity for mobile professionals to shape collective expectations regarding institutional structures and practices through a process known as normative isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In effect, enrollment professionals may inadvertently be legitimizing the use of external consultants and their inherent market ideals by utilizing various venues to speak their praises and consequently increase their use among colleagues. Essentially, everyone is increasingly drinking the Kool-Aid® and this is leading toward a reorientation of how enrollment management is viewed and practiced.

### **Closing Thoughts: Examining Underlying Issues and Future Directions**

In the days leading up to the launch of the annual conference hosted by the National Association of College Admission Counseling (NACAC), we were deluged daily with solicitations from vendors who wished us to join them for dinner, visit their booth, enter to win an iPad or other prize, make an appointment to discuss strategy, and learn more about our competitors while we attended the conference. Indeed, one wag recently termed the overwhelming number of commercial enterprises present at such conferences as the “admissions industrial complex!” Whatever else we have proven here, it is clear that the terms and conditions of the American marketplace have become a daily fact of life in student enrollments.

One can say that this is as intended when financial aid was granted directly to students instead of institutions in 1972. And it is likely that this action fostered institutional competition for students who could bring those resources with them. But it is also true that this competitive stimulus alone did not lead us to the pursuit of prestige and revenue using market models. 1972 was at least a decade prior to the advent of marketing consultancies, US News rankings, test preparation giants, and the guidebook and personal consulting practices that now mark the college enrollment landscape.

What we have shown here is that institutional enrollment professionals and their practices are reliant upon the advice and services of commercial vendors and entities who themselves are driven by profit motives and market forces. We find that these motives and values have found their way into the thinking, daily practice, and the lexicon of enrollment personnel. To be fair, we must note that enrollment managers may indeed be rational actors as they make these connections and utilize these services.

We do not question some pursuit of prestige and revenue in the service of these lofty and important social goals. However, we wonder to what extent prestige and revenue have replaced them in the daily striving to outpace the competition.

Prestige and revenue enhancement, as we have discussed, are compelling goals for institutions, and the nature of student enrollments represents a critical component of national notions of prestige while enrollment numbers are the make or break element of institutional financing at most colleges and universities. We cannot expect enrollment professionals, then, to act in ways that are counter to the goals that drive their institutions.



What we are compelled to ask, however, is whether the institutional goals of prestige and revenue enhancement align with the missions of the institutions and whether the inculcation of marketplace models and practices should be normative in the area of enrollment management. Institutional mission statements focus primarily on social goals such as the discovery, transmission, and the application of knowledge as well as the production of citizen leaders and participants. We do not question some pursuit of prestige and revenue in the service of these lofty and important social goals. However, we wonder to what extent prestige and revenue have replaced them in the daily striving to outpace the competition.

We view the commercialization of enrollment management as symptomatic of this phenomenon. It seems understandable that institutions may choose to adopt market-based practices and commercial models for administrative functions such as finance, purchasing, human resources, and auxiliary services. It also seems reasonable that mailing services, some information technology, printing and other services that may extend the expertise, efficiency, and effectiveness of the admissions and student aid offices, for instance, be informed or executed by external service providers. It is quite something else, it seems to us, to turn over to profit-making entities, which are removed from the institutional mission, such critical educational functions as the strategy regarding which students should enroll, what and how to communicate with them, and how to influence their behavior. The enrollment officers interviewed in this study identified numerous instances of the latter, including market segmentation, promotion and branding efforts, financial aid leveraging processes, and more.

Moreover, and as we have shown, our analysis of interviews with over fifty senior enrollment leaders reveals numerous means by which enrollment professionals are linked to commercial enterprises. These include:

- Reliance on the business literature and information sources
- Reliance on consulting for strategic guidance and planning
- Utilization of vendor services
- Purchase of consulting expertise
- Use of consultants as an internal political strategy
- Use of consultants as a device to monitor competitors
- Recommendations of particular consultants and services by colleagues
- Assumption of paid and unpaid positions as consultants or board members of consulting firms
- Career paths that lead some professionals out of higher education and into consulting.

We see this as a profound set of relationships, one that has led to a normalization of business practices and business ideals in the enrollment profession.

It is a fact, then, that business thinking and business practices are a part of the enrollment profession, and apparently a large part. In our view, a wise profession would now ask itself:

- What educational ends are served by these associations?
- What is their affect on students and the college-going environment?
- Is this a road enrollment managers choose to travel, or is it one they feel they must travel?
- Can a proper balance between educational values and commercial practices be struck and, if so, what does it look like?
- If this is not the road that enrollment managers prefer to traverse, what steps must be taken to build the exit ramp?

Vigorous questions about direction are required when the pursuit of prestige and revenue are becoming increasingly normative while conflicting with the wider social goals and benefits that serve as core values at the heart of many published institutional missions.

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